

# Farmers Helping Farmers

## Asotin County

*“Being on the committee really helps to put a face on the government,” - Asotin County Committee Vice Chair Bruce Petty.*

### FSA committee tailors program to county's topography

Managing acres in the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reservation Program (CRP) can present unique challenges to Washington's producers. Asotin County's distinctive topography, with high ridges and deep valleys, creates trouble for choosing uniform grazing dates for the CRP managed grazing option. The option is used to maintain and improve habitat and water quality.

To deal with this problem, the Asotin County committee created a system to break up the grazing dates between the different elevations of the land. This decision saved producers time and money, and was a local solution to a local problem. It illustrated one of the ways local committees can tailor national farm programs to meet their county needs.

The county committee system provides a unique federal government experience: farmers and ranchers are elected by their peers to help FSA administer farm programs and they provide an important source of information.

“Being on the committee really helps to put a face on the gov-

ernment,” said Asotin County Committee Vice Chair Bruce Petty, who became interested in the position when the producer representing his area retired. “The producers know us and can come to the committee and talk to us.”

The FSA has a two-pronged mission: on one side it oversees a portfolio of programs dealing with disaster assistance, conservation practices, and revenue assistance. The agency also makes loans to farmers and ranchers for annual operating expenses, purchasing or expanding agricultural operations and emergency loans to repair natural disaster damage.

The three-to-five person committees are the place that producers can appeal most agency decisions. Committees also make decisions which help to determine program payments. The committees meet approximately once a month. Voting in the annual committee election helps guarantee the committee truly represents the agricultural producers in each county, and is



*Asotin County FSA Committee tends to business.*

a knowledgeable group of producers.

“Serving on the county committee is a community service,” Chair Earl Fitzgerald said. “They aren’t highly sought-after, politically-driven positions, and this helps us end up with well-respected committees.

The Asotin County Committee is made up of three grain and livestock producers. Fitzgerald originally served on the committee in the 1970s when FSA was the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. Committees can also appoint advisors to speak for producer interests that aren’t already represented by the committee. Susan Appleford, the third member of the committee, originally served as an advisor representing female

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producers. Appleford has since been elected a regular member, and is in her second term.

“I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the position, it’s helped me understand the programs better and gave me the knowledge to help explain those programs to my neighbors,” Appleford said.

The Asotin Committee pointed to a situation earlier in the year as a major accomplishment. Due to program payments, some producers were going to have to file additional paperwork with the Internal Revenue Service.

The Committee’s job then became one of communication: explaining the circumstances around the paperwork and calming fears of audits or other negative repercussions helped to smooth the process for both producers and FSA, according to Petty.

Each county committee draws its members from local administrative areas. Counties are broken up into administrative areas for the purposes of voting. Local administrative areas encompass similar agriculture or geographic areas. Nominated by local farmers and ranchers, candidates

must live in the county or local administrative area they will represent and must be eligible to vote in the county election. Members serve on staggered three-year terms so that one-third of the seats are up for re-election each year, and producers can serve for nine consecutive years. After more than 70 years, the county committee structure remains a cornerstone of FSA’s efforts to preserve and promote American agriculture, said Jeremy Nelson, Asotin County FSA Executive Director.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Appleford said.

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